

NEWSLETTER

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School Restructuring Options Under No Child Left Behind: *Exploring What Works When*

What is the best course of action when schools are faced with restructuring? Four years after the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, this question is uppermost in the minds of schools and school districts across the country—especially those that have struggled to succeed with all of their students. Restructuring is a provision in the federal law that calls for a serious and systemic intervention by a school district in any of its schools that are chronically unable to meet established achievement targets (also known as adequate yearly progress, or AYP).

To provide decision makers with the information they need to make informed decisions about school restructuring, The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement recently commissioned a series of papers titled *School Restructuring Options Under No Child Left Behind: What Works When?* Each of the four papers focuses on one of the first four options identified in the law and summarizes the research base that supports it. The series is designed to help district leaders understand what is known about when and under what circumstances each of these options works to improve student learning.

This month's newsletter provides a snapshot of each paper in the *What Works When* series. The full text of each paper is available at http://www.centerforcsri.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=282&Itemid=88

The Options

The legislation is unambiguous. Schools that do not make AYP for five consecutive years must, under the direction of their school district, engage in restructuring that is consistent with existing state law. Districts can choose to do one of the following:

- Reopen the school as a public charter school.
- Replace all or most of school staff, including the principal.
- Enter into a contract with an entity such as a private management company with a demonstrated record of effectiveness to operate the school.
- Allow the state to take over the school.
- Engage in any other major restructuring of the school's governance arrangement (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002).

Common Themes

While each restructuring option under NCLB is unique, several common themes influence the success or failure of implementing all of them, say the authors of the series. These factors include the following:

- **Governance.** at both the district and school level. Districts and schools must choose a restructuring option that is compatible with school and district organization (e.g., centralized or decentralized).
- **Leadership.** Selecting and supporting the right leader for any of the restructuring options is imperative.
- **Environment.** Time, additional district support, and clear expectations are all environmental factors that will impede or support progress.

OPTION 1. *What Works When: Reopening as a Charter School*

Authors Matthew Arkin and Julia Kowal (2005) define charter schools as public schools that operate independently of a local school district under a legal agreement (or charter) between the school's governing body and the group that has authorized the charter, usually a local school board, public university, or state board of education. Generally, charter schools are not bound by collective bargaining agreements and have the freedom to define their own curriculum.

Traditionally, charter schools are start-ups; that is, they come into existence with the charter. Charter schools under restructuring are considered

conversions. Conversions come in two varieties—voluntary and start-fresh (Arkin & Kowal, 2005). A voluntary conversion occurs when “a traditional school initiates conversion itself due to the flexibility afforded by a charter” (p. 6). A “start-fresh” conversion is defined as a “school [that] is converted by the district or state due to low performance and...is expected to be significantly different from the school it replaces” (p. 6). Most schools that are restructured as charter schools are “start-fresh” conversions.

Converting a traditional public school to a charter school as a means of restructuring is a relatively recent phenomenon, with most “conversions” having opened since 2004. At their best, conversions are “marked by dramatic, speedy improvements in student achievement,” say the authors (p. 9). They cite as an example Seth McKeel Middle School in Florida, which was one of the lowest-achieving schools in the state when it converted to a charter school in 1998. Since its conversion, the progress of the school's students has been steady, and by 2005, it had been recognized as one of the top performing schools in the county.

OPTION 2. *What Works When: Turnarounds With New Leaders and Staff*

Historically, a school improvement initiative that resulted in replacing all or most of the school staff including the principal was referred to as reconstitution. Despite its use as a school improvement strategy, little has been written about this practice. Because of this dearth of research, in *What Works When? Turnarounds With New Leaders and Staff*, authors Julia Kowal and Emily Ayscue Hassel explore this second restructuring option through a cross-industry analysis of the practice of “turnarounds.” They say “in the general literature, [a] turnaround refers to a dramatic improvement in performance created by various changes within an organization” within a short period of time (p. 5).

Instituting a successful turnaround is not an easy task. Citing the work of Doherty and Abernathy, Kowal and Hassel assert that “turnarounds are often a strategy of last resort, used when less drastic intervention strategies have failed to improve performance” (p. 9). What makes this strategy so

challenging is that a turnaround's success is almost completely dependent on selecting the right leader. Successful turnaround leaders are people who set "high goals, take initiative, and are relentlessly persistent" (p. 23). Further, Kowal and Hassel state that turnaround leaders "gather and use data, think through problems, and follow up with targeted action" (p. 23). They say such leaders are confident and have "strong interpersonal skills to motivate teachers, parents, and students around the new school's mission," but also are willing to "sacrifice a long-term relationship if it is necessary to achieve immediate learning results" (p. 23). The leader must do all of this, and he or she must do it quickly.

Successfully implementing a turnaround may be difficult, but it has been done. Kowal and Hassel note that the San Francisco Unified School District began implementing turnarounds in the 1980s. By 1992, "a review panel found...that school restructuring [or turnarounds] had enhanced students' achievement" and "recommended the expansion of the restructuring policy" (p. 7). The authors also cited as an example the Houston Independent School District's decision to order a turnaround of Rusk Elementary School in 1993. The school was "known for low test scores and animosity between parents and staff" (p. 8). Rusk is now a "model turnaround, consistently gaining ratings of Acceptable or higher on the Texas grading system" (p. 8).

OPTION 3. *What Works When: Contracting With External Education Management Providers*

Authors Julia Kowal and Matthew Arkin explore a third restructuring option—entering into a contract with an entity such as a private management company with a demonstrated record of effectiveness to operate the school. Called educational management organizations, or EMOs, these groups (both for-profit and nonprofit) have been successful at effectively running school operations such as facilities, custodial services, and personnel management that have historically "inhibited learning" (Kowal & Arkin, 2005, p. 8). Under this option, a district contracts with an EMO to operate both the education and management services of the school. Although these organizations are responsible for day-to-day operations, the

district "retains ultimate authority and control" and manages the contract (p. 11).

Whatever the reason for selecting this option, it is imperative that districts recognize the importance of negotiating an EMO contract that outlines the exact parameters under which the school will be operated and then monitoring that contract. "Research suggests that districts should establish a governance structure for [these] schools to oversee contract implementation and school accountability" (Kowal & Arkin, 2005, p. 11).

Several large urban school districts (Philadelphia and Chester Upland in Pennsylvania, Hartford in Connecticut, and Baltimore) have entered into contracts with EMOs. In many of these situations, the EMO has been successful in addressing financial and infrastructure concerns. However, research on their demonstrated success in improving student outcomes is thin.

OPTION 4. *What Works When: State Takeovers of Individual Schools*

State takeovers of individual schools are not well documented. To date, author Lucy Steiner finds no examples of districts that have voluntarily "turned over" a failing school to the state.

There may be reasons that districts have not chosen this option: States may have no more capacity or expertise to operate the failing school than the district does. Further, the restructuring legislation offers little clarity regarding what the state should do once it takes responsibility for a restructured school. However, *What Work When? State Takeovers of Individual Schools* does envision several scenarios under which a state takeover could be a viable option, such as if the state education agency (SEA) has more resources and better access to "experts" than the district. The author also notes that SEA personnel may be more familiar with research and practices of high-performing schools and may be better equipped to effect dramatic change.

Regardless of the lack of first-hand examples or a strong research base, the author concludes that a state takeover of a failing school is a "challenging but not impossible task" (Steiner, 2005, p. 24).

Further Needs

All of the authors of this series cite the need for additional research on the restructuring options. For example, they recommend that successful conversion charter schools be compared to average- and high-performing traditional public schools and average-performing charter schools. They also recommend that future studies more rigorously analyze the competencies of the most successful turnaround leaders and that more research be conducted on the qualities of EMOs that determine how well schools in their networks perform.

Charting the Course

Restructuring is here. Some will meet it with reluctance, while others will embrace it as an insurance policy for improved student achievement. The *What Works When* series provides information about the options that district and school leaders need to make informed and strategic decisions about the futures of their restructured schools.

References

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